

READING THE UNIVERSE STORY THEOLOGICALLY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF A BIBLICAL NARRATIVE IMAGINATION

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The article assesses different ways of incorporating the results of the historical sciences of cosmology, geology, and evolutionary biology into theology. Appeal to biblical poetics and the philosophical and theological hermeneutics of narrative reveals serious flaws in the attempt to recast a history of origins as a “universe story.” Framing the results of science as a mosaic of petit narratives (such as provided by Aldo Leopold’s classic Sand County Almanac) gives a more adequate correlation to Scripture and avoids problems common to all metanarratives.

THE METAPHOR OF MAKING A “BOOK” of the natural world, to be read together with the book of Scripture has a long and venerable history in the Christian tradition.¹ In his book *Deeper than Darwin*, John Haught takes up the metaphor of the two books with the suggestion that the book of nature, like all books, may be read at different levels. Exploring this application of the metaphor suggests that the understanding of natural history given by modern science and an understanding that draws existential and religious implications from that history need not conflict with each other; but neither should they unfold in complete isolation from each other. They are both readings of the same book, but at different levels.² Both levels of reading get at the way things really are; both are necessary

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¹ This tradition is traced in Jitse M. Van der Meer and Scott Mandelbrote, eds., *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions*, 4 vols. (Boston: Brill, 2008).

² John F. Haught, *Deeper than Darwin: The Prospect of Religion in an Age of Evolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2003) 13–25, 58–68, inter alia.

to understand the cosmic story adequately. In this article I follow Haught's suggestion in a direction that he leaves largely unexplored: what kinds or techniques of "reading" are required for a Christian theological presentation and interpretation of natural history? Learning to read nature's history scientifically requires years of laborious preparation, with formation by and into a variety of scientific exercises that gradually shape and refine the way one approaches the phenomena of the cosmos. How, in a corresponding way, is a narrative imagination that is Christian and theological formed? I take it as uncontroversial that such a narrative imagination will be shaped by a prolonged engagement with Scripture.³ To the extent that the engagement with Scripture both requires and develops certain skills and sensitivities, how do these skills and sensitivities combine with, inflect, or modulate the corresponding ones requisite for a scientific reading of the cosmos? What parameters for reading the two books together are disclosed by pursuing this question?

More precisely, what parameters should govern the reading of the universe's *history*, its *story*? One feature of modern science is that it presents the succession of events that constitute the universe's temporal dimension as a *history*, a succession of contingent events that can, nonetheless, be rendered intelligible, explained, understood. This feature has meant a significant variation on the oft stereotyped "scientific method."⁴ For my purposes, the point is that when scientists present our past, they tell stories, as do Christian theologians.⁵ I argue that neuralgic and long-standing problems in relating science (evolution in particular) and Christian faith can be approached most fruitfully by attending to the narrative dimensions of both.⁶ I turn first to this argument. Second, I offer a critical analysis of what

³ Haught gestures toward this premise without exploring it at length: "Familiarity with biblical narrative, in which anticipation of a fulfilling future is the dominant motif, prepares the mind as well as the heart to read nature dramatically, as a story bearing an incalculable future of new creation" (ibid. 65). While I agree with the general idea, I argue in what follows that "familiarity with biblical narrative" has a more complex texture and suggests an approach to science that is correspondingly more complex.

⁴ The late Harvard paleontologist and popular science writer, Stephen Jay Gould, offers a description and defense of the scientific credentials of the historical sciences in *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: Norton, 1989) 277–91.

⁵ To be sure, scientists claim a unique authority for the stories they tell, so that perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that they tell a history, or histories. I use "story" here (with its implication of fictiveness) to insist, with Paul Ricoeur, that the line between (fictive) story and (factual) history is not a clean one, and that the narrative structures that govern one govern the other.

⁶ Among important beginnings for such work is Steven Happel's *Metaphors for God's Time in Science and Religion* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). While he discusses narrative in chapter 2, his primary focus is not on the potential for discursive

is probably the most prominent theological genre that attempts a joint reading, both scientific and religious, of the universe's history—using the rhetorical trope of “the universe story.” Paradigmatic of this genre is Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry's *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*.⁷ I argue that, while this genre does indeed respond to the exigency of such a joint reading, there are serious problems with how it does so. I surface these problems by considering the universe story from two perspectives: that of political theology, particularly its raising of the question of suffering; and that of philosophical and biblical hermeneutics, particularly regarding their insights into the intertextuality of the Bible and into the fine-grained features of individual biblical narratives by which they resist being subsumed into grander narratives. The positive outcome of the second part of my argument is the definition of some parameters that ought to govern both the way theology positions itself and its normative sources, and also the way theology should position the science of evolution and draw on its resources. It being granted that one takes science seriously, that one accepts those findings of science generally accepted among scientists, it makes a big difference *how* one appropriates those results of modern science and *how* they are articulated and positioned for a joint reading with a theological reading. On the view argued here, presenting them as an overarching story of a developing universe involves serious difficulties.

Finally, to complement the negative critique with a positive proposal, I consider an alternative way of rendering science's narratives—not as one overarching grand narrative (as is done in the universe story genre),

innovation and discovery proper to narrative, but to metaphor. I focus here on narrative. As already intimated, I agree with much of what Haught says; however, I miss in his discussion a more precise treatment of how the kind of theological narrative imagination that emerges from reading the Bible functions to complement a scientific “reading” of the cosmos. Moreover, as will become evident in what follows, in my judgment a careful consideration of the biblical narratives (in the plural) in all their complexity, as well as in their interaction with other biblical genres, does not warrant any single motif for defining the meaning of the drama of natural history, be it “design” or be it “promise” (Haught's suggested alternative to “design”). Nonetheless, my article should be considered an attempt to follow up on the important hint that Haught has provided. Similarly, I agree with much of Celia Deane-Drummond's discussion of the proper genre for articulating and appropriating evolutionary narratives in her *Christ and Evolution: Wonder and Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009). I draw, however, on different resources than her preferred sources in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Sergii Bulgakov.

⁷ Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

but as a mosaic or quilt-work of “petit narratives.”⁸ To make this case I consider a classic example of such a way of deploying the results of science, Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*.⁹ I will show that this text offers a model for construing the results of modern science that avoids the shortcomings of the way science is appropriated by the universe story genre, and also constitutes a more fruitful partner for a further interweaving with the Bible.¹⁰

NARRATIVE MEDIATION OF HUMAN IDENTITY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

In this section I argue that more careful reflection on how the narrative imagination functions is crucial for a fruitful approach to central problems raised by evolution. I begin with an insight passed along to me by a colleague who teaches evolution in the department of biological sciences at the University of Notre Dame. At the outset of each course she asks her students what about evolution makes it so troubling. They consistently respond in terms of the impact of evolutionary accounts of human origins on the sense of our own uniqueness and our place in God’s plans. As she describes it:

Students don’t like the idea that their existence may be even partially the result of chance or random events occurring in the universe. I try to explain that natural selection is a deterministic process (versus mutation, which is stochastic), but they really want their existence to have been preordained from the beginning and have a specific purpose designed by God.¹¹

What is at stake, then, is the nature of human identity on the one hand, and divine providence and the extent to which (and the form under which) we

⁸ The concept of “Petit narrative” is introduced by François Lyotard in, e.g., *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984).

⁹ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, commemorative ed., intro. Robert Finch (New York: Oxford University, 1989). Leopold’s classic text is neither on the universe’s history nor on the evolution of life or on the earlier “chapters” in its history. However, he does work out of the science of ecology, closely related to evolution, and he does attempt a reading of the natural world that is both scientific but also attends to questions of ethical, existential, and even religious import.

¹⁰ Thus, to be clear, the elaboration of my positive proposal focuses on the second half of the twofold task identified at the end of the previous paragraph: correctly identifying and positioning the results that science provides. Proceeding to the actual intercalation with biblical resources would exceed the scope of a single essay, or even a book.

¹¹ From a conversation with Dr. Hope Hollocher, and email correspondence of July 29, 2008.

can perceive its presence in natural history on the other. On both counts narrative is a crucial category. To further specify this claim I refer to two figures who have argued it at some length: Paul Ricoeur and Johann Baptist Metz.¹²

Demonstrating and exploring the interrelationships of narrative, temporality, and human identity was a primary focus of Ricoeur's work.¹³ The principal thesis of one of his last works, *Oneself as Another*, is that identity is always narratively mediated. In a précis of this work Ricoeur writes:

It is therefore plausible to affirm the following assertions: a) knowledge of the self is an interpretation; b) the interpretation of the self, in turn, finds narrative, among other signs and symbols, to be a privileged mediation; c) this mediation borrows from history as much as fiction making the life story a fictive history or, if you prefer, an historical fiction.¹⁴

One reason why narrative is so important for self-knowledge is that self-knowledge must come to terms with the self's temporality. A person's individual existence, including the events, objects, and personal relationships that provide its interpretive anchors, is in continual flux with the passage of time; it is, moreover, inserted, often bewilderingly so, in a vast tableau of time pressed upon us by scientific and philosophical reflection. In his earlier trilogy, *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur argued that narrative provides the means by which we integrate our experience of biological time with chronological time, thus providing foundations for the construction of identity:

Between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human existence there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity. To put it another way, *time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.*¹⁵

¹² Charles Taylor also links narrative and identity; see his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1989) 47–50, 105. For an analysis of accounts (including those of Ricoeur and Metz) of how narrative is foundational for the construction and maintenance of corporate identity, see Mary Doak, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology* (Albany: SUNY, 2004).

¹³ The starting point for Ricoeur is his *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984–1985). He continued the themes of that book in subsequent monographs, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992); and *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004). For essays relative to biblical hermeneutics, see Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity," *Philosophy Today* 35 (1991) 73–80.

¹⁵ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 1:52, emphasis original.

According to Ricoeur we discern “in the plots we invent the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit, mute temporal experience.”¹⁶

Metz echoes these assertions from the perspective of political theology, with, however, a particular emphasis. Narrative is the category in terms of which we integrate and communicate experience to ourselves as well as to others. It is for him the crucial genre within which the biblical vision of human identity, of what threatens it and how it is saved, is disclosed.¹⁷ This is partly because reliance on narrative prevents a totalized presentation of the meaning of history that is abstracted from the specific histories of individuals and groups. These histories are replete both with moments of meaning, joy, and fulfillment, which are easily assimilable into such a totalized meaning, and also with meaninglessness, despair, and loss, which are not (and thus are often elided or explained away). As Metz put it:

With narrative it is possible to discuss it [the universal meaning of history] in such a way that the talk about this universal meaning does not shift over into a drive to logical totality, into a kind of transcendental necessity, as a consequence of which the destinies of individuals, the practical histories of meaning for individual men and women, would become ineluctably secondary in comparison with a “necessary” meaning of salvation for the whole of history, and could be integrated only after the fact into the subjectless realm of this kind of definitive history of salvation. In the narrative conception of Christian salvation, history and histories, the one history of salvation and multiple histories of salvation and catastrophe emerge together and are immanent to each other, without one truncating the other.¹⁸

Metz takes a further step to avoid or interrupt the totalization of history’s meaning into one that is abstracted from the experiences of concrete persons with their unique histories. He stipulates a specific kind of narrative, emphasizing “dangerous stories,” which compel us to remember past suffering, particularly the suffering of others. This remembering destabilizes complacent and ultimately inhuman constructions of our individual and corporate identity that relegate those who have died in the onward march of “progress” to oblivion:

For a reason that holds on to this respect [for the claim made on us by human suffering], history takes the form of a tradition whose continuation happens “narratively” in “dangerous stories”—never in a purely argumentative way. Such stories break through the spell of a total reconstruction of history by abstract-instrumental reason. They show that our consciousness is one that is a “consciousness involved in stories,” which is always falling back on identifying itself narratively. . . . In his film

¹⁶ Ibid. xi.

¹⁷ See Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans., ed., and study guide by J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007) 187–88.

¹⁸ Ibid. 154.

Fahrenheit 451 François Truffaut has given an unforgettable portrayal of this “consciousness involved in stories,” which nourishes itself from the accumulated narrative power (in books), as a haven of resistance, as the only alternative to a world of total manipulation and unfreedom.¹⁹

Given this account of narrative, one can see that, in the clash between evolution and Christian faith, competing sets of narratives for the construal of human identity are at stake.²⁰ Both evolutionary biology and Scripture present narratives that bear on human origins and subsequent history, narratives that alternatively generate, sustain, or destabilize the ways we understand ourselves in relationship to one another, to the natural world, and to God. As such, they set up a field of tensions and harmonies not only for the academic theologian trying to work out a theological anthropology, but also and more pressingly for Christians living in a society where these evolutionary stories are pervasive: explicitly so in popular scientific presentations, tacitly in fiction, film, theatre, and art.

Looking at the ways that narratives construct but also problematize individual and corporate identity also helps explain why the negative impact of evolution on the Genesis creation stories has been so much more intractable than earlier difficulties posed by geology. By 1830 the new science of geology had already rendered literal readings of the Genesis stories untenable, positing the existence of so-called “deep time”: a cosmic timespan measured in millions of years rather than millennia. Yet, as Martin Rudwick has pointed out, this development was relatively uncontroversial for Christian theologians at the time.²¹ There was, after all, a long tradition going back at least to Augustine of interpreting the

¹⁹ Ibid. 196.

²⁰ The point is not that biblical narratives allow the construction of a comfortable, secure identity, while evolutionary narratives are “dangerous” for our attempts to construct such an identity. As Metz points out, scriptural narratives are often at their most powerful when they interrogate and challenge us, problematizing our too-easily bought understandings of who we are and what we ought to do. What is at issue, then, is the difference between the problematization entailed in God’s address to Cain in Genesis 4:10—“What have you done! Listen: your brother’s blood cries out to me from the soil!”—and the punch-line that Richard Dawkins draws from the weave of narratives that emerge from evolution: “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. . . . DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music” (*River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* [New York: Basic, 1995] 132–33).

²¹ See Martin Rudwick, *Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005). If there were objections to “deep-time,” it came from a sense that these expanding time-scales could be a “slippery slope” that led to the denial that there is any beginning in time to the created world. This would be to deny, it was thought, the doctrine of creation. See *ibid.* 115–18.

days of Genesis 1 to represent much longer periods of time, and it was still possible to insert biblical accounts of human origins into the wide gaps left open in geological history.²² These interpretive moves could respect the findings of science and still employ biblical narratives to integrate the vast expanse of time opened up by geology with the personal time that configures the human sense of individual and corporate identity. Indeed, Rudwick reports that his research into the history of geology suggests that something like a biblical narrative imagination was an asset to those who sought to read the earth's history:

I believe there is strong evidence that the idea of nature having its own history was most congenial to those who already had a profoundly historical perspective, not only on their own human world but also on the cosmos as a whole and on the transcendent realm of divine initiative that they believed underlay it. In other words, those who were most attracted by the possibility of reconstructing an eventful past history of the earth were often also those who already understood their human place in the cosmos in terms of an unrepeated sequence of contingent events, suffused with divine meaning and intent, stretching from primal Creation through pivotal Incarnation to ultimate Parousia. Within the intellectual framework of the Christian religion it made sense to try to understand the natural world, no less than the human, as part of this divine drama.²³

Correlating biblical and scientific narratives becomes more difficult as paleobiology constructs increasingly detailed narratives for describing human origins and early history. Formerly, the history told by paleobiology was sketchy: besides the assertion that homo sapiens descends from earlier species in the primate order, few details could be filled in to construct a substantive narrative, and any claims about human identity made on this basis were so highly speculative that they could be easily ignored. Yet the gaps are now increasingly being filled in, as books like *Tree of Origin: What Primate Behavior Can Tell Us about Human Social Evolution* show.²⁴ Narratives of human origins come with all the authority that science confers in

²² This strategy is still in use among prominent evangelical Protestant commentators. See, e.g., Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, trans. David G. Preston (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity, 1984) 154–70; and Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997) 40, 57–62. Another use of this strategy is found in C. S. Lewis's section on Adam and Eve in his *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Touchstone, 1996) 61–78.

²³ Rudwick, *Bursting the Limits of Time* 7. This already suggests the value of investigating in detail the precise kind of narrative imagination engendered by a sustained engagement with biblical narratives.

²⁴ Franz B. M. de Waal, ed., *Tree of Origin: What Primate Behavior Can Tell Us about Human Social Evolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2001). This literature is becoming increasingly self-critical, but this is not so much a signal of the tentativeness of its claims as of a growing sense of maturity. See, e.g., Jonathan Marks, *What It Means to Be 98% Chimpanzee: Apes, People, and Their Genes*, new preface (Berkeley: University of California, 2002).

modern culture, and their increasing detail leaves fewer and fewer gaps into which to insert the biblical narratives. Moreover, they are now presented both as historical accounts and as etiological narratives that explain the past origins and current significance of every facet of human culture, including morality and religion.²⁵

Etiological narratives (like those in Genesis) draw their persuasive force both from their ability to symbolize and illuminate our current situation, and from the claim that the events recounted from the past really did happen and explain features of our current situation. Even when some exegetes and interpreters in the 19th and 20th centuries relaxed the claim that the biblical origin narratives could be read as historically accurate accounts of the beginnings of our species, they still insisted on the symbolic power of the narratives to illuminate our current experience. Yet this claim becomes increasingly precarious as the science of evolution produces stories that *both* assert factual-historical accuracy *and* claim to give insight into our current common condition. Darwin had, to be sure, already done this in *The Descent of Man*. What is different is the scale, the detail, and the complexity of the project, as well as its growing self-confidence.²⁶ The conflicts engendered by these competing sets of narratives increase the sense of anxiety over evolution, and the feeling that it is hostile to Christianity.²⁷

Thus far I have focused on the categories of narrative and identity. Greater attention to the former also pays dividends on the other issue broached above: the place of contingency in the history told by evolution. This troubles modern undergraduate students of evolution, as my colleague in the biological sciences notes; it has also been a major objection against evolution from voices as diverse as the 19th-century Reformed theologian Charles Hodge and the current Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn.²⁸ There are several approaches to this worry. The contingency

²⁵ See, e.g., David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002); and Michael Shermer, *The Science of Good and Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Share, Care, and Follow the Golden Rule* (New York: Henry Holt., 2004).

²⁶ With a telling use of religious imagery, a recent article in *National Geographic* celebrating the Darwin year confidently proclaimed that “to understand the story of evolution—both its narrative and its mechanism—modern Darwins don’t have to guess. They consult genetic scripture” (Matt Ridley, “Modern Darwins,” *National Geographic Magazine* 215. 2 [February, 2009] 59).

²⁷ Of course, in many instances the project *is* conducted out of such hostility, as evident in figures like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett.

²⁸ On the former, see Charles Hodge, *What Is Darwinism?* (New York: Scribner, 1874). On the latter, see Schönborn’s controversial “Finding Design in Nature,” *New York Times*, July 7, 2005.

of evolution has often been overplayed (there is, in fact, a good deal of rule-governed process in evolution); the situation has been further complicated by the dominance of mechanistic models and imagery in the ways that Christians imagine “design” and the working out of purpose in history.²⁹ William Paley’s “watchmaker God” is too much with us when we think about how purpose can be achieved or discerned. The presence of contingency in evolution and the objections it raises among theologians suggest another reason to consider narrative. Narrative is the category par excellence in which contingency and purpose are constellated with each other.³⁰ On the kind of intelligibility appropriate to narratives, Ricoeur argues that “to make up a plot is already to make the intelligible to spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or the probable from the episodic.”³¹ In other words, the virtue of narrative lies precisely in its ability to discover purpose in the seemingly purposeless, to disclose design in what appears sheerly contingent.

That this virtue was well known to the authors of the Hebrew Bible is a principal thesis of Robert Alter’s *The Art of Biblical Narrative*:

The ancient Hebrew writers . . . seek through the process of narrative realization to reveal the enactment of God’s purposes in historical events. This enactment, however, is continuously complicated by a perception of two, approximately parallel, dialectical tensions. One is a tension between the divine plan and the disorderly character of actual historical events . . . ; the other is a tension between God’s will, His providential guidance, and human freedom, the refractory nature of man.³²

The genius of the biblical narratives lies in the diverse narrative strategies and tactics that their authors employ (indeed, on Alter’s view, discover for the first time) for this task. Far from attempting to excise or overcome contingency in history, these narratives embrace it, making of contingency an integral element of the manner in which God’s action in history is disclosed to us. If we understood this better about the human histories described in the Bible, would we be so disturbed by the ways that evolution

²⁹ Elizabeth Johnson, among others, has made this point very well. See her article, “Does God Play Dice: Divine Providence and Chance,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 2–18.

³⁰ Stephen Jay Gould avers that “the theme of contingency, so poorly understood and explored by science, has long been a mainstay of literature. We note here a situation that might help to breach the false boundaries between art and nature, and even allow literature to enlighten science” (*Wonderful Life*, p. 285). He does not consider, however, the possibility that such enlightenment might undercut the broader claim of the book that it is impossible to “read” purpose in nature, due to the presence of contingency there.

³¹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 1:41.

³² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981) 33. See also Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985).

inserts contingency into natural history?³³ Perhaps we have read the biblical narratives as providing too monolithic and unambiguous a reading of how God's purposes are revealed in history, a point that Metz has also made. As I have already suggested, for Metz, the great biblical stories are always also dangerous stories; they problematize the ways we construct history's meaning (particularly when it is a meaning worked out behind the backs of history's victims), as much as they underwrite them. Biblical stories raise as many questions as answers, causing us continually to turn back to God and to seek a meaning that irrupts into history as a hope for those for whom history has heretofore offered little hope.

This section has certainly not exhausted the features of narrative, nor its importance to the dialogue between Christian theology and evolution. I have confined myself to asserting its pertinence for addressing the ways evolution unsettles the construction of human identity from scriptural sources, and the ways we think about God's action in history. This is enough to set the stage for an analysis of one attempt to come to terms with the tension generated by the narratives produced by modern science.

THE PURPOSES AND STRUCTURE OF THE UNIVERSE STORY

Swimme and Berry's *The Universe Story* has become a very influential book in ecotheology and environmental ethics. Among other books that draw on it as a fundamental basis for their own articulations of the universe story are Leonardo Boff's *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* and Cletus Wessels', *Jesus in the New Universe Story*.³⁴ Other authors, such as Diarmuid Ó Murchú and Rosemary Radford Ruether, deploy similar arguments.³⁵ *The Universe Story's* impact on the Christian environmental

³³ The status given to contingency identifies another way in which Paley's "watchmaker God" and the modeling of God's activity as designer is discordant with Scripture. It is not just that the model of God as designer or engineer is not found in Scripture, but the kind of transparency to divine action that the model of designer brings with it does not fit well with the way divine agency is disclosed in the biblical narratives.

³⁴ See Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997); Cletus Wessels, *The Holy Web: Church and the New Universe Story* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000) esp. 13–44; and Wessels, *Jesus in the New Universe Story* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004).

³⁵ See Diarmuid Ó Murchú, *Ancestral Grace: Meeting God in Our Human Story* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008); and Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Dieter T. Hessel (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000) 97–112, esp. 103–5.

movements cannot be overestimated.³⁶ It qualifies, in other words, as a paradigmatic text. I proceed to critique this paradigm only with the recognition that the book's influence indicates that it has correctly understood the need to creatively interrelate science and religion, precisely when it comes to their narrative dimensions. My argument is that *The Universe Story's* mode of executing this important project ultimately defeats its aim.³⁷

Swimme and Berry start from the premise that "in the modern period, we are without a comprehensive story of the universe" that can give "meaning to life and to existence itself."³⁸ Thus, they echo precisely the view just elaborated concerning the importance of narratives for forming identity and enabling individuals and societies to act creatively in history. Their general thesis is that modern science now provides the makings for such a story. While they are not always consistent on this, it seems clear that the universe story is meant to replace the specific stories of different religions; minimally, this larger story is taken to provide an overarching framework for interpreting them. This recommendation emerges from the way that they portray human history and the place of religion therein, so I start by sketching their position in rather broad strokes, beginning with the emergence of human culture and history.³⁹

On their view, the Neolithic village represents a high point in human history. In this culture human beings enjoyed a "mystique of participation in the cosmological order of the universe," facilitated by a vocabulary of "power words."⁴⁰ While the authors give no precise definition of power words, I take the latter to comprise an intensely symbolic vocabulary that puts human beings into direct contact with the cosmos or, better, express their integral "belongingness" to that cosmos. Swimme and Berry contend that the vast majority of these words were developed in a Neolithic village

³⁶ In her book, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2007), Sarah McFarland Taylor details the influence of Berry's work in particular on women's religious orders in the United States that are on the cutting edge of environmentally reformed practices. Mary Judith Ress makes a similar point in her *Ecofeminism in Latin America: Women from the Margins* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006) 59–68.

³⁷ And, needless to say, my disagreement with this particular paradigm for telling the universe story does not extend to other features of these theologies, such as, for example, mining the resources of the wisdom traditions of the Hebrew Bible for reformulating Christology and soteriology (as in Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism" 107–8).

³⁸ Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story* 1.

³⁹ They start with the Big Bang. Their assimilation of the different physical processes described by physics, chemistry, biology, etc., into one plot, with one overarching plot mechanism is problematic as well.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 177–78.

culture, and that the loss of those cultural sites has impoverished our vocabulary accordingly.

Without direct appeal to Genesis 1–2, the two authors nonetheless describe Neolithic village culture in Edenic terms:

[The Neolithic period] was a revelatory moment in the most significant sense of the term. The rituals whereby humans enter into communion with the cosmological order originated at this time. . . . The archetypal symbols [power words?] communicated to the human in its genetic endowments were activated for the first time in this setting. It was a magic moment, a moment of psychic innocence that would never occur again, a moment that we return to constantly in our efforts to understand the true meaning of the words that we use, words that determine our most profound sense of reality and of value.⁴¹

The emergence of urban culture, however important, is represented as a “fall” from this “moment of total intimacy of humans with the natural world and with the deepest immersion of the human in the mysteries of existence itself.”⁴² In describing the emergence of “classical cultures,” Swimme and Berry invoke the idea of the “axial age” first put forward by Karl Jaspers, a period of a millennium or so during which the world’s great cultures and religions came into existence. They argue that these religions responded to “an ontological or metaphysical perception of the transient nature of existence in the temporal order,” as well as to that “loss of innocence” that had formerly been so integral to the Neolithic village.⁴³ Religions developed various forms of hierarchy and theocracy as a compensation for this lost immediacy. Priest-kings provided divine direction and a sense of inner security for an urban culture that was distancing itself from its environing cosmos.

These classical religions were accompanied by sacred revelations codified in sacred scriptures. Swimme and Berry think that all these religions passed subsequently through a period of “synthesis and universalization,” for which the medieval Scholastic movement in Christianity is the paradigm. The problem is that these religions all make claims to unique validity; these competing claims have stood in the way of intercultural communication and the integration into the kind of broader global culture that Swimme and Berry think is essential.⁴⁴ They also bemoan the development across cultures of an “exaggerated anthropocentrism” and, particularly in the West, the weakening of “the mystical bonding of the human with the natural world.”⁴⁵ Echoing Carolyn Merchant’s argument, they connect

⁴¹ Ibid. 178.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. 188.

⁴⁴ This observation signals their concern not only with the environment but also with religious pluralism.

⁴⁵ Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story* 199.

this weakening to the growth of patriarchy and the development of other forms of oppression, racism in particular.⁴⁶

The subsequent history of global humanity in the Common Era is characterized for them by the development and consolidation of the nation state as the primary form of social organization. In addition, Swimme and Berry devote an entire chapter to the birth and development of science, revealingly entitled "The Modern Revelation." They could hardly describe this development in more epochal terms. This period, they say, saw "a momentous change in human consciousness" eminently deserving of the adjective "revelatory," by which they intend "a new awareness of how the ultimate mysteries of existence are being manifested in the universe about us."⁴⁷ They argue that this new scientifically funded perception presents the cosmos to us not as a noun, not as a static reality "out there," but as a verb, an "ever-transforming cosmogenesis," of which we are only the most recent product and agent. To be sure, science has given humanity unprecedented power to intervene in natural processes, with potentially catastrophic consequences. However, it also has made possible this dramatically new way of relating to the cosmos and thus has the potential to inaugurate a new chapter in the universe story, which Swimme and Berry describe in the subsequent chapter as the "Ecozoic era."

The Ecozoic era will be characterized by a renewed sense of immediacy and "at-home-ness" in the cosmos. The principal difference between this "new revelation" of the cosmos and earlier ones, including even the Neolithic, is that for earlier generations the cosmos was a static reality for which change occurred only in terms of a cyclical rhythm (of the seasons, say). The biblical tradition added a sense of directionality to history, but a directionality that encompasses only human history. Swimme and Berry suggest, then, that the lost sense of involvement and even immediacy with nature that characterized the Neolithic period is now being recovered through science, but with the added dimension of a deep sense of the immanent dynamism and self-organizational power of the cosmos. This assertion on their part of what science tells us comes with a critique of much of modern science as positivistic and mechanistic. However, Swimme and Berry argue that there is a broad hermetic-mystical tradition within science that continually opens up the possibility of overcoming the mechanistic despiritualized framework of science as it has been (and still is) practiced for the most part.

In their advocacy of the universe story, then, Swimme and Berry propose an architectonic structure of history that is recognizably Romantic and

⁴⁶ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

⁴⁷ Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story* 223.

Idealist—that is, one that 19th-century thinkers as diverse as Schleiermacher, Herder, Schelling, Novalis, Hegel, and even, perhaps, Marx—would have recognized.⁴⁸ It is a cyclical drama in three acts. The first act portrays humanity in an immediate but naive relationship to nature and to itself. The second act tells of the painful but necessary shattering of this immediacy, leading to a sense of alienation from self and nature—alienation now writ large in modernity's social, political, and economic structures. But because of the advances of human reason (science) a reintegration is now possible on a higher plane that recapitulates that first immediacy, now enriched by the gains of the distancing, objectifying second moment. Swimme and Berry describe this possibility as follows:

Through the renaissance traditions at the origins of modern science we are able to find our way back to the mythic world of classical times and further back into the Neolithic and even into Paleolithic times when there was an immediate experience of the great liturgy of the universe itself. Only now we have a new understanding of the sequence of transformations that have been taking place over these past eras. . . . Even our most recent modes of scientific understanding of this immense story are themselves the latest phase of the story. It is the story become conscious of itself in human intelligence.⁴⁹

In short, once we learn to tell and learn from the universe story, we are poised to fulfill our unique vocation: “to enable this entire community to reflect on and to celebrate itself and its deepest mystery in a special mode of conscious self-awareness.”⁵⁰ If one replaces the language of cosmos with that of “the Absolute” or “Spirit,” then we would have a classically Hegelian, or perhaps Schellingian formula: we are finite concretions of infinite Spirit, objectified in the cosmos, but now also on the verge of becoming conscious of itself. For this realization to dawn we have to go through a comprehensive reshaping of our language, a massive paradigm shift, with all the connotations of incommensurability with our past tradition (at least from the axial age on) that more radical interpretations of Thomas Kuhn's well-known concept entail. Scientists must become shamans, and shamans (i.e., all persons endowed with religious passion and imagination) must embrace science.

And what of existing religions? Here the authors are ambiguous. On the one hand they explain that the universe story is not intended to replace or suppress “the other stories that have over the millennia guided and energized the human venture.” Rather, this universe story provides “a more comprehensive context in which these earlier stories discover in themselves

⁴⁸ I draw here on Charles Taylor's elaboration of this scheme in *Hegel* (New York: Cambridge University, 1975) 11–36, esp. 35–36.

⁴⁹ Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story* 237.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 264; see also 1, 266–68.

a new validity and a more expansive role.”⁵¹ This seems to suggest continuing validity for earlier sacred revelations like the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. On the other hand, this concession of ongoing validity to earlier revelations is retracted by other statements, such as this one:

This change [required to enter into the Ecozoic era] requires . . . something equivalent to a new religious tradition. Our new sense of the universe is itself a type of revelatory experience. Presently we are moving beyond any religious expression so far known to the human into a meta-religious age, that seems to be a new comprehensive context for all religions.⁵²

In summary, then, I suggest that this position can be laid out in terms of the following claims: (1) the natural sciences generally agree on an account of the origin and development of the cosmos that can only adequately be read as an overarching “narrative” or “story”; (2) this narrative has a certain privileged authority insofar as it (2a) is authorized by science, and (2b) transcends particular cultural and religious differences around the globe; because of this narrativity, authority, and universality, (3) once its religious dimension is disclosed, this account of the origins and development of the cosmos can ground a more universal religious and/or theological account—vis-à-vis particular religions and their sacred narratives—of the relationship of God, nature, and human beings, such that it is (4) uniquely suited for a desperately needed environmental ethics. Finally, (5) other sacred stories promulgated by particular religions have to be positioned and interpreted in the light of this universe story. While there is no space to go into detail on this, I suggest that other authors who appeal to the universe story usually commit themselves to something like this constellation of claims. What are we to make of them?

READING THE UNIVERSE STORY: CRITICAL QUESTIONS

I will pose some critical questions to this use of the universe story, but not without first voicing once again a strong affirmation of the basic intention. As I argued in the earlier section, developments in science do compel us to rethink the ways we tell the stories of our origins in the light of modern science. I have also already affirmed that the genre of narrative is eminently appropriate for expressing and articulating the human experience of belonging in time, putting into play Ricoeur’s assertion that “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative

⁵¹ Ibid. 238.

⁵² Ibid. 255. Writing about Genesis in a later work, Berry states a similar position in more forceful language: “The story of the universe is the new sacred story. The Genesis story, however valid in its basic teaching, is no longer adequate for our spiritual needs” (*Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker [San Francisco: Sierra Club, 2006] 57).

mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.” From this assertion it follows that a narrative configuration of our understanding of the cosmos, with its vast extent and deep rhythms is necessary, if the time disclosed by modern science is to become human. Conversely, if the narratives of revelation are to continue to provide for us a vision of a possible world in which we are invited to live, they must embrace temporal existence as our reason presents it to us. The question at issue here is what *kind* of story-telling will best do this.

I start with a question that Metz insists we pose to any narrative rendering of human identity. He warns that whenever we tell history we must be careful that we are not telling one that is only a history of the victors, the history of those who made it.⁵³ This is Metz’s objection to the hegemony of the symbol of evolution in modern culture. He would interrogate any telling of the universe story with the question of whether it foregrounds or suppresses a dangerous “memory of past suffering.”⁵⁴ In classical terms, this is to broach the problem of theodicy: how to think about God in the face of the presence of suffering in God’s creation. After God’s dethronement as the subject of history, the question rebounds to the new subject of history: the human being. As a consequence, theodicy becomes anthropodicy—justifications of our faith in humanity as the subject of history, in the face of the suffering that is so inextricably woven into the history that humanity makes.⁵⁵ Mutatis mutandis, the universe story brings with it the need for a “cosmodicy.” How do we think about the presence of suffering, on a massive scale, in the story of the cosmos, particularly when the cosmos itself is understood to be the subject of history? How do we justify our faith in the cosmos?

If we pose this question to Swimme and Berry’s story, the picture gets murky. Like most modern theologians who appropriate scientific evolutionary schemes to tell the universe story, Swimme and Berry insist that evolution no longer entails the sort of unilinear, ruthlessly agonistic “survival of the fittest” scheme that was appropriated by social Darwinism in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, when one reads their own proposals, it is not clear that theirs is an improvement. If human history is to be

⁵³ See Metz, *Faith in History and Society* 102–5.

⁵⁴ For further reflection on how a Metzian political theology might contribute to ecological theology, see J. Matthew Ashley, “Environmental Concern and the ‘New Political Theology,’” in *Missing God? Cultural Amnesia and Political Theology*, ed. John K. Downey, Jürgen Manemann, and Steven Ostovich (Münster: LIT, 2007).

⁵⁵ Metz, *Faith in History and Society* 119. Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 2002), argues that tracing the shifts in the quest to grapple with the problem of evil gives, in fact, a better organizational thread for understanding modern philosophy than considering questions of epistemology.

understood as a part of a broader cosmogenesis, as Swimme and Berry insist, then what sociopolitical implications follow from the fundamental “dialectic” of cosmogenic history that they describe in the following terms:

The cosmogenesis of Earth and universe proceeds by establishing stable regimes that are then broken apart by the activities of the parts, thus leading to new stable regimes with new members included in the new dynamics. In the best of circumstances, the succeeding regimes are characterized by an enhanced diversity, a more extensive autopoiesis, and a richer interrelatedness. But at times, given the inherent turbulence of the universe, these later regimes are ripped asunder with no further development. The unfolding of the universe proceeds with reversals and surprises, sporadically advancing in various directions and then as suddenly collapsing.⁵⁶

This narrative scheme allows Swimme and Berry to look with relative equanimity on, say, the Permian extinction—in which over 95 percent of marine species and 70 percent of terrestrial species became extinct.⁵⁷ For them this mass extinction, as well as others, can and should be understood as setting the stage for a subsequent explosion of biological innovation.⁵⁸ At an earlier point in the book, Swimme and Berry tell the story of how the self-assertion of the first cells supersaturated the earth’s atmosphere with oxygen. This led to their demise, but it also forced the creative advance of a bacterium that could metabolize oxygen.⁵⁹ If taken as a comprehensive narrative template, why might we not look at an ecological collapse in the coming centuries caused by human excess with equal equanimity? Might we not look with a little more serenity at the dangerous self-assertion of modern technological society? Might we not look ahead to a postenvironmental-collapse biotic community that would have “enhanced diversity, a more extensive autopoiesis, and a richer interrelatedness”? Does not their omnicompetent plot structure sap the urgency from the very environmental concern that the universe story is meant to inculcate?

In fairness to Swimme and Berry, they insist that “in no sense do we mean to suggest that the cruelties taking place in the Earth community today will be justified by the emergence of what is to come.”⁶⁰ Yet it is hard to see how this conclusion can fail to follow from the narrative scheme they adopt and the explanatory power they invest in it. Denials or appeals to mystery come too late once a meaning to history has been so precisely framed with such a clear and omnicompetent plot structure. In this regard,

⁵⁶ Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story* 99.

⁵⁷ See “Permian extinction,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2009; *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9474325> (accessed September 28, 2010).

⁵⁸ Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story* 118–27. They do speak of these moments as examples of the “opacity” of the universe, but overall the tone is one of celebration rather than mourning.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 93–98.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 60.

Hegel was more honest.⁶¹ It does not help (at least on intra-Christian grounds) that Swimme and Berry also attempt to escape this conundrum with a Nietzsche-like appeal to the instrumentality of suffering in the creation of new works of art, philosophy, technology, and institutional reform. “To eliminate the tension [of the bafflement produced by suffering] would be to eliminate the beauty.”⁶² This sort of appeal is vulnerable to a more radical Nietzschean revaluing, as carried on by competing “narratologists” such as Jacques Monod and Richard Dawkins, for whom the universe story, with all its awe-inspiring beauty, is nothing but a story of the will to power, of self-assertion for the sake of self-assertion.⁶³

Again, to be fair, it should be noted that it is impossible for any metanarrative of this sort to escape the Scylla of ignoring the problem of suffering or the Charybdis of explaining it away within a framework that, Swimme and Berry’s protests notwithstanding, justifies past suffering in the light of the greater good that arises once the telos of the metanarrative has been achieved. Other narrative framings are possible as well—e.g., that of the biblical storyteller par excellence, the author(s) of the Deuteronomistic history from Moses to the Exile. This narrative explains suffering in history as God’s just response to Israel’s infidelity to the covenant. Suffering is explained by reference to prior transgression, although always with the hope of restoration by a merciful God subsequent to the people’s repentance.

My point is not that we should abandon such large-scale narratives, but that, taken alone or even as primary, they are insufficient, indeed dangerous. When a narrative has one omniscient plot device, such as the one Swimme and Berry adduce, it requires correction, even interruption, by other elements of the story, or even other genres. The Bible can guide us here as well. There, one well-known problematization of the confident answer of the Deuteronomist storyteller to the problem of suffering is found in the Book of Job. However one understands it, its enigmatic answer to the problem of suffering lodges a passionate no against the Deuteronomistic answer given by Job’s three friends. We could, however, also point to other

⁶¹ See, for example, Hegel’s famous discussion on how to reconcile oneself with the fact that history is “the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized” (G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956) 21.

⁶² Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story* 60. As I will argue below, following Alter, the biblical stories, while they do not entirely eliminate this tension, they treat it in a far more nuanced way, one that even intensifies a sense of mourning and lamentation, of turning toward God full of questions (as Metz would say), and of committed praxis.

⁶³ See Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Vintage, 1971); regarding Richard Dawkins, see, e.g., his *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic, 1995).

modes of problematization of simple renderings of the plot line for God's action in history: in the apocalyptic traditions—with their assertion of God's dramatic interruption of history—or in other genres in Wisdom literature such as Ecclesiastes' disturbing assertion of the vanity of human pretensions to see purpose in history at all, or even in the profound response to suffering that comes from the recitation of the Psalms of Lament.⁶⁴

This brings me to a first conclusion to be drawn from posing the “cosmodicy” question to the universe story. I follow Ricoeur's formulation in his reflections on the significance of the Bible for theology. He argues that however central narrative is to the Bible, we can neither reduce the Bible to narrative nor ignore the contribution made by other genres, such as law, prophecy, or wisdom:

No biblical narrative works merely as narrative. It receives not only its theological but even its original religious meaning from its *composition with other modes of discourse*. I have underlined elsewhere the unbreakable conjunction between narratives and laws within the Torah. . . . In this way we are also led to acknowledge that the Hebraic tradition is prevented from becoming a mystifying ideology thanks to its dialectical relation to prophecy. Prophecy, on the one hand, reveals within the narratives themselves the potential of unfulfilled promises that reorient the story of the past toward the future; narratives, on the other hand, provide the eschatological anticipation of the “new” era with images and types. . . . Furthermore, we have to take into account the deep impact of wisdom literature on the narratives themselves. . . . Finally, the reenactment of the narratives in the cultic situation and their recounting through the psalms of praise, of lamentation, and of penitence complete the complex intertwining between narrative and nonnarrative modes of discourse.⁶⁵

Elsewhere, criticizing various “reductions” of the naming of God carried on by ontotheological discourses, Ricoeur makes the same point:

The word “God” says more than the word “being” because it presupposes the entire context of narratives, prophecies, laws, wisdom writings, psalms, and so on. The referent “God” is thus intended by the convergence of all these partial discourses. It expresses the circulation of meaning among all the forms of discourse wherein God is named.⁶⁶

A theology, including an ecological theology of the sort that Swimme and Berry strongly advocate, cannot succeed only by framing and drawing

⁶⁴ Daniel J. Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer?: A Scriptural Approach to the Human Condition* (Franklin, Wis.: Sheed & Ward, 2000), provides a helpful overview of the different biblical responses to the problem of suffering, which cannot be synthesized into one conceptual argument.

⁶⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Narrative Theology,” in *Figuring the Sacred* 236–48, at 245, emphasis original.

⁶⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Naming God,” in *Figuring the Sacred* 217–35, at 227–28. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 248–81, makes a similar claim in considering the New Testament with its genres of kerygma, narrative, apocalyptic, and doctrine.

upon a *narrative* construal of the meaning of human existence, even, and precisely, as an existence framed in the history of the cosmos. Other forms of discourse that interrupt and fragment the narrative are required if that narrative is not to collapse into the sort of triumphant metanarrative about which Metz and many postmodern voices complain.⁶⁷

If nothing else, this recognition disqualifies the universe story as a replacement, or even metalevel frame, for Scripture. Even at the level of narrative itself, however, we may not yet have adequately gauged the full depth of nuance and complexity of biblical narratives. Biblical stories should be read not as more or less homologous building blocks or instantiations of a single plot line. Rather, they should be read as tiles of a broader mosaic that not infrequently have their most potent impact by the ways they accumulate to problematize and frustrate our premature leaps to insight into the meaning of the whole that they make up. As Alter points out, the artistry of biblical narrative is manifest as much in what it leaves in relative darkness as in what it discloses:

I would suggest that causation in human affairs is itself brought into a paradoxical double focus by the narrative techniques of the Bible. The biblical writers obviously exhibit, on the one hand, a profound belief in a strong, clearly demarcated pattern of causation in history and individual lives, and many of the framing devices, the motif-structures, the symmetries and recurrences in their narratives reflect this belief. God directs; history complies. . . . The very perception, on the other hand, of godlike depths, unsoundable capacities for good and evil, in human nature, also leads these writers to render their protagonists in ways that destabilize any monolithic system of causation, set off a fluid movement among different orders of causation, some of them complementary or mutually reinforcing, others even mutually contradictory.⁶⁸

Thus my earlier statement concerning the problematic theodicy of the Deuteronomistic historian requires nuance. The overall plot device that explains suffering is complexified and even problematized from within by the refusal of the particular stories out of which the larger narrative is composed to integrate smoothly into that overall explanation. A narrative imagination formed by close engagement with these stories, then, will also resist the framing of what science reveals to us in terms of one plot structure, of the sort that Swimme and Berry propose. Might not this more complex understanding of how even narrative itself functions in Scripture lead us to look for or allow a similar complexity of the many narrative fragments that are emerging from diverse sciences of cosmology, geology, biology, and paleoanthropology, and make us more tolerant of these

⁶⁷ For an illuminating discussion of different stances toward metanarratives in late modernity, see Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 31–36.

⁶⁸ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative* 125–26, emphasis added.

histories' resistance to our desire to find an unambiguous story of progress, design, and purpose? Moreover, such an understanding of narratives, so necessary for adequately grasping Scripture, can provide a response to thinkers like Monod or Dawkins who argue that, lacking this perspicuousness, we are compelled to the conclusion that there is no meaning or purpose at all to be found in this history, that we live in a cosmos profoundly at odds with our own desires and hopes for meaning.⁶⁹ This is a false dichotomy—a history purely and unambiguously transparent to purpose, or one irredeemably meaningless. Careful attention to how biblical narratives have nurtured a complex sense of meaning and purpose can unmask the specious character of this dichotomy. Such a biblically nourished narrative imagination can suggest complementary ways of reading evolutionary narratives. That is, just as in the 18th century (as Rudwick argues) the first beginnings of a disciplined “reading” of the earth’s history were helped and not hindered by a biblical imagination, a more nuanced narrative imagination, of the sort that Alter outlines, may be the necessary antidote for overly simplistic readings of that history today.

In summary, my objection to the universe story as a device for interrelating evolution and faith is, first, that as an omniscient metanarrative it cannot respond adequately to the problem of suffering. I focused on two reasons to account for this inadequacy by contrasting how Scripture responds to the problem of suffering. One is that the artistry of biblical narrative lies precisely in its capacity to gesture persuasively toward a meaning and possibility for redemption in history without glossing over the obdurately contingent, and without prematurely closing the book on human failures and suffering in history.⁷⁰ As Alter shows, this capacity is worked out at the level of the fine detail of the individual stories, rather than in any summary overview of salvation history that we might put in its place. The second illuminating contrast lies in the way Scripture complexifies the view that emerges from its narratives by their intercalation with other genres, such as prophecy, law, and wisdom.

⁶⁹ See the texts in n. 63. For a succinct presentation of their positions, and his own response, see John F. Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2000) 121–44; and Haught, *Deeper than Darwin* 1–11.

⁷⁰ Thus, coming from different resources, I agree with the critique that Deane-Drummond levels in her advocacy of drama (theodrama, to be precise) over and against an “epic” approach that too quickly glosses over the resistance of particular details to the plot line epic, and also renders the reader as a more or less dispassionate observer, outside the story, rather than a participant in the drama, obligated to take up a position within it. See Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution* 48–53. She draws heavily on Ben Quash’s interpretation of Balthasar in *Theology and the Drama of History* (New York: Cambridge University, 2005).

At this point, then, I propose the following parameters for reading the universe story theologically—by which I mean, for the present, with Scripture. The first is that we must keep our eyes fixed on the complexities in the biblical resources we enlist. No composite or synthetic narrative that sacrifices such complexity should be trusted.⁷¹ There is a consequence as well for how we enlist science. Returning to the metaphor of the “two books,” I suggest we look for their correspondence not only when it comes to what they disclose, but also with reference to the form in which they do so, since form (or genre) cannot be completely separated from content.⁷² Thus, if it is true that significant features of the form of biblical revelation are the fine-grained structural complexity of the individual stories and the complex interplay of genres, then should we not seek presentations of science that evince a similar complexity? This requires, however, that we consider the results of science in the fine details, in the petit narratives that come from cosmology, geology, biology, and paleoanthropology, rather than jumping prematurely to “the big story.”

AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM: ALDO LEOPOLD'S *A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC*

In fact, other forms of scientific writing evince precisely this kind of complexity. Some of the most powerful and evocative presentations of science employ the genre of the short essay, the petit rather than grand narrative. Many examples could be adduced.⁷³ Here I draw on one of the most important figures in the history of the U.S. conservation movement, Aldo Leopold (1887–1948), author of a charter text for that movement: *A*

⁷¹ Paul Ricoeur makes this point regarding the story of original sin, which he calls a “rational symbol.” Such stories do not have their own self-contained coherence and consistency, which is why, when simply taken on their own, they can lead so easily to distortion and misunderstanding. Rather, they point back to the complexity of their scriptural roots, which for Ricoeur includes not only the complex and multileveled story in Genesis 2 and 3, but also all the varied biblical passages that bring to light the experience of repentance and redemption. See Paul Ricoeur, “Original Sin’: A Study in Meaning,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, 1974) 269–86. These scriptural roots must always remain in view, otherwise it is all too easy to caricature and dismiss the narratives (as with, e.g., Ó Murchú’s grotesque rendering of the story of the fall in *Original Grace* 5–6).

⁷² Following a dictum formulated by, among others, David Tracy: “Genres are not merely taxonomic devices designed to help us locate a text (‘This is a novel’). Genres are productive of meanings” (*Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* [New York: Crossroad, 1987] 45).

⁷³ Thus, rather than invoking a Carl Sagan or a Stephen Hawking, I am gesturing here toward figures like Loren Eiseley, Lewis Thomas, and Stephen Jay Gould; one might include Annie Dillard and Ursula Goodenough as well.

*Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There.*⁷⁴ Admittedly, Leopold's work is not a story of origins, but it does intend to represent the place of human beings in the world under the pressure of our transformed understanding of the nature of that world.⁷⁵ I choose it as well because of its success, its continuing ability to generate committed action on behalf of our threatened planet. What lessons can be learned from Leopold on how to frame the results of modern science?

Leopold was a skilled ecologist, one of the first graduates of Yale's School of Forestry, who worked subsequently as a forester in the West before taking a position at the University of Wisconsin.⁷⁶ He was a voracious reader and an accomplished writer; not uncoincidentally, he was a careful reader of the Bible.⁷⁷ *A Sand County Almanac* is his last book (actually published after his untimely death of a heart attack suffered while fighting a brush fire near his home), in which he formulated and proposed his "land ethic." He chose an unusual form for the book that would convey the lessons of a lifetime's work in the conservation movement. The book employs several genres: short vignettes depicting the environs of his sand county shack outside Madison, journalistic essays drawn from a lifetime of work as a conservationist, and philosophical reflections on public policy and environmental ethics.⁷⁸ Yet, the bricolage and hybridization of diverse genres is indispensable to the substance of his message, as is the artistry with which he constructs the narratives by which he communicates the science of ecology. These features also make his work an apt paradigm for considering how to frame the results of modern science in telling the universe story.

Leopold is most well known for his "land ethic," stated in the final chapter of the book: "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise:

⁷⁴ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*.

⁷⁵ That is, Leopold, drawing on modern science, responds to the exigency identified in *The Universe Story*: that we lack a unifying narrative to guide our action, particularly in dealing with the natural world.

⁷⁶ For Leopold's life, see Curt Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1988).

⁷⁷ While he held organized religion at arm's length, he was "no mean student of the Bible" (Meine, *Aldo Leopold* 183). He studied the Bible at the Lawrenceville School, then at Yale, and included it later in the vast range of literature that he read through the rest of his career (ibid. 34, 64, 65, 160, 183–84). He had a particular fondness for the prophets and wisdom literature (ibid. 183).

⁷⁸ He had some difficulty persuading potential publishers that the bricolage of genres making up *A Sand County Almanac* would find a readership. For details on the history of its composition, see Curt D. Meine, "Moving Mountains: Aldo Leopold and *A Sand County Almanac*," in *Aldo Leopold and the Ecological Conscience*, ed. Richard Knight and Suzanne Riedel (New York: Oxford University, 2002) 14–33.

that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. . . . The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively: the land.”⁷⁹ He begins this chapter by recounting the story of Odysseus’s execution of a dozen of his slave-girls after his return to Ithaca, noting that, however horrific we find this act today, it was ethically unexceptionable at the time because the circle of persons who counted did not include these women, held as property.⁸⁰ Today we understand (at least in principle if not always in practice) that the ambit of solidarity must include all persons, and not just male aristocrat-warriors. But this insight has not come without struggle. Indeed, earlier in the book Leopold refers back to the decisive event of his parents’ generation, the Civil War, in which the widening of the circle of those with whom we understood ourselves to be in community was, on his reading, precisely what was at stake.⁸¹ Yet, he notes, “there is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to the land and to animals and plants which grow upon it. Land, like Odysseus’ slave-girls, is still property. The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations.”⁸²

But how is this widening of the circle to be accomplished? For Leopold, developing an ethic requires building an awareness of a common community. “All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts.”⁸³ Part of what is required to build or expand an ethics, then, is a deeper awareness of the community to which we already belong: “We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.”⁸⁴ Leopold follows this principle by devoting the first half of the book to a set of narrative sketches—the “almanac”—that communicates his experience of the land of a worn-out farm in rural Wisconsin. The modest stories and sketches attempt to make us familiar with the biotic community; they convey experiences of seeing, feeling, understanding, loving, or even having faith in a world that heretofore we took for granted. They also evince the sort of fine-detailed artistry that Alter highlights in biblical narratives. Walking through a field of melting snow in January, for instance, Leopold depicts its different inhabitants:

The mouse is a sober citizen who knows that grass grows in order that mice may store it as underground haystacks, and that snow falls in order that mice may build subways from stack to stack: supply, demand, and transport all neatly organized. To the mouse, snow means freedom from want and fear.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac* 203–4.

⁸⁰ This is the opening reflection from the concluding essay, “The Land Ethic,” *Sand County Almanac* 201–2.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 15.

⁸² *Ibid.* 203.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 214.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 4.

He contrasts this with the hawk:

The hawk has no opinion why the grass grows, but he is well aware that snow melts in order that hawks may again catch mice. He came down out of the Arctic in the hope of thaws, for to him a thaw means freedom from want and fear.⁸⁶

In this context, Leopold observes of the mouse that “the thawing sun has mocked the basic premises of the microtine economic system.” And then, finally, the skunk, whose wandering tracks reveal to his tracker’s eyes no particular purpose.

The skunk’s track leads on, showing no interest in possible food, and no concern over the romplings or retributions of his neighbors. I wonder what he has on his mind; what got him out of bed? Can one impute romantic motives to this corpulent fellow, dragging his ample beltline through the slush? . . . I turn homeward still wondering.⁸⁷

In this three-page petit narrative that opens the “almanac” section of his book, Leopold begins his project of problematizing the strictly economic, utilitarian attitude of the “sober citizens” of his day toward the land. He suggests that this community entails a network of interweaving purposes, some of which frustrate our drive to categorize (as in the case of the skunk). His ironic stance toward the ways the different members of this community predicate meaning and make plans suggests comparisons with a similar stance in Ecclesiastes, however much elsewhere in his book Leopold insists on the necessity to discern purpose, make plans, and act on them (as does the Bible).⁸⁸

In the first third of his book, then, Leopold’s is not one sweeping narrative but a series of finely crafted little stories, characterized by both attention to scientific detail and the complexity of plot and characterization. The second part of the book (“Sketches Here and There”) narrates events in Leopold’s life that led him to crucial insights into what it means to be a conservationist. Only in the final third of the book (“The Upshot”), then, does Leopold express in more terse conceptual form his vision of conservationism and the ethos of human being in nature that it entails. The point to stress here is that the final, more philosophical and ahistorical, section achieves its full impact only in combination with the earlier

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 5.

⁸⁸ See, e.g., his reflections on the responsibility to make clear choices, and reflect on the impact of those choices, in managing the land (ibid. 67–73), where he suggests that our ability to thus reflect is part of what makes us distinctive: “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, but He is no longer the only one to do so. When some remote ancestor of ours invented the shovel he became a giver: he could plant a tree. And when the axe was invented he became a taker: he could chop it down. Whoever owns land has thus assumed, whether he knows it or not, the divine functions of creating and destroying plants” (ibid. 67).

narratives. Even within the first two parts the story-telling in its pure form is complemented by more journalistic reporting and even by scientific tabulation; and the third part is not without story-telling of its own. The different genres work together, complementing and complexifying one another in ways that make *A Sand County Almanac* the classic it was quickly recognized to be. In sum, Leopold's work evinces that intricacy of narrative artistry and diversity of genres that is precisely what is necessary for addressing such a crucial limit question as that of human beings' relationship to nature.⁸⁹

For Leopold it is by attending to our surroundings that the circle of solidarity can widen, that a broader compass of beings can come into view that make a claim on us in various ways. Here again the narrative form is crucial because it gives a way of framing a common context, a common story to which "we" belong ("we" being variously construed). In this regard it is important for Leopold's strategy that the site of these little stories *not* be a spectacular landscape, worthy of national park status. Leopold's are not the romantic depictions of exotic landscapes of the sort that Alexander von Humboldt wrote, firing the imagination of the young Charles Darwin.⁹⁰ His descriptions are resolutely ordinary. It is precisely in the invitation to see, feel, understand, love, and have faith in the community of life as it is instantiated in an overworked sand-county farm that Leopold crafts a means to widen the circle of solidarity in which we experience "the other" that makes a claim on us.

Leopold's strategy, then, is not to overawe us with the immensity of the story in which we are involved, or to argue our solidarity on the basis of our common origins in the fiery forges of the novae and supernovae of the distant past. Rather, he seeks by the very "smallness" and "everydayness" of his petit narratives to lure us, to seduce us into a deeper attentiveness to, and, finally, care for, our world. This strategy allows a more complex and nuanced naming of the cosmos and our place in it, in the same way that the biblical interweaving of a variety of, at times, competing narratives, along with other genres of law, prophecy, wisdom literature, and lament, allows a more nuanced naming of God. Besides Ecclesiastes, already mentioned, one could point as well to parallels between how these stories function and

⁸⁹ Here I follow Langdon Gilkey's understanding of limit questions, as presented (inter alia) in "Is Religious Faith Possible in an Age of Science," in *Society and the Sacred: Toward a Theology of Culture in Decline* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 104–19, esp. 110, 113–14.

⁹⁰ See Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: A Biography*, vol. 1, *Voyaging* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1995) 133–36. There is much in the contemporary universe stories that reminds one of these portrayals of nature by early 19th-century romantic travelers. In contrast, Leopold is resolutely antiromantic, however much he shares a deep appreciation of the beauty of nature.

how the Book of Job invites us to a new appreciation of our place is God's creation by means of the short but carefully crafted vignettes of the natural world in which we live: the ridiculous ostrich that can still "laugh at the horse and its rider" (39:18); the mountain goats and wild ass, whose lives are governed by a wisdom outside human ken, but no less valued by God; the horse, which is used by men for battle, even though they cannot claim to have given it its power and ferocity.⁹¹

Finally, such an approach avoids the dangers that confront any meta-narrative when it broaches the problem of evil and suffering, as it certainly must. Since I posed this question to the universe story, it is only fair to pose it to Leopold as well. The question of suffering, loss, and even evil, does come to the fore in *A Sand County Almanac*, and this in a pivotal way, particularly in Leopold's reflections on how human history and natural history interact. He neither univocally celebrates human progress and its impact on the land nor condemns it *tout court*. Rather, he invites us to evaluate that progress within a broader axiological framework. He invites this evaluation at certain key moments in the narrative sketches, by appealing to memory, particularly the memory of what has been lost, and by inviting us to a sense of mourning. In a sketch almost precisely halfway through the book, Leopold tells of visiting a monument erected in Wisconsin's Wyalusing State Park to mark the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon.⁹² The disposition he calls upon in describing this monument is not awe and wonder at the scope and beauty of the cosmic story, but simple mourning, a sense of loss, a sense for what is missing. This is precisely where he locates the specifically human, that which ultimately makes a widening of the circle of solidarity possible:

For one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun. The Cro-Magnon who slew the last mammoth thought only of steaks. The sportsman who shot the last pigeon thought only of his prowess. . . . But we, who have lost our pigeons, mourn the loss. Had the funeral been ours, the pigeons would hardly have mourned. In this fact, rather than in Mr. DuPont's nylons or Mr. Vannevar Bush's bombs, lies objective evidence of our superiority over the beasts.⁹³

⁹¹ For a more detailed meditation on Job as nature-writer, see Bill McKibben's interpretation of the complex ways that these divine speeches succeed in inculcating dispositions (equally necessary) of humility and joy on the part of human beings when faced with the world in which they live: Bill McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1994) 33–68.

⁹² See Aldo Leopold, "On a Monument to the Pigeon," *A Sand County Almanac* 108–12. For pictures of the monument, see http://www.ulala.org/P_Pigeon/Monument.html (accessed August 1, 2010).

⁹³ *Ibid.* 110. Leopold reiterates the claim two pages later: "To love what *was* is a new thing under the sun, unknown to most people and to all pigeons. To see America has history, to conceive of destiny as a becoming, to smell a hickory tree

In an earlier sketch Leopold talks of the loss of the cutleaf Silphium. If we were to see it on the side of the road most of us would probably take it to be a weed, but he portrays it in ways that highlight its strength and tenacity.

Silphium first became a personality for me when I tried to dig one up to move to my farm. It was like digging an oak sapling. After half an hour of hot grimy labor the root was still enlarging, like a great vertical sweet-potato. As far as I know, that Silphium root went clear through to bedrock. I got no Silphium, but I learned by what elaborate underground stratagems it contrives to weather the prairie drouths.⁹⁴

The principle that governs this story is given a bit earlier: “We grieve only for what we know. The erasure of Silphium from western Dane county is no cause for grief if one knows it only as a name in a botany book.”⁹⁵ Thus Leopold’s depiction of the Silphium’s “personality” in resisting his attempts to dig it up. By urging us in this way to a more intimate knowing, Leopold invites us to that very human response of mourning. His strategy also exploits the converse: what we grieve, we know in a more intimate, significant way, with a kind of knowing that makes demands on us, that requires us to take a stand regarding what has been lost.

As modest as it seems, even so simple and evidently undemanding a stand as mourning what has been lost has significance for what still exists, but exists as imperiled. As Metz pointed out, mourning is a dangerous way of remembering. Such remembering calls into question the oblivion into which we have allowed to fall so many of the earth’s species that are today threatened with extinction. It challenges us to let those species have a claim on us, to be included in some way in the circle of solidarity that defines those who will count in our moral evaluations. This is, moreover, a sense of community that does not depend on absolute symmetry: we need not attribute humanity or “subjecthood” to the other members of the biotic community for them to have a claim on us.⁹⁶ As Leopold suggests, our capacity

through the still lapse of ages—all of these things are possible for us. . . . In these things, and not in Mr. Bush’s bombs and Mr. DuPont’s nylons, lies objective evidence of our superiority over the beasts” (112). Bush was a principal organizer of the Manhattan Project.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 49. Overgrazing, plowing, and mowing succeeded in subduing the Silphium, something he was unable to do with his shovel.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 48.

⁹⁶ Here I agree with Daniel Cowdin’s observation that “not all moral patients—objects of moral considerability—need be moral agents. . . . The point is not to force nonpersons into a persons framework (by construing them as subjects, for instance) but to explore whether nonpersons warrant moral consideration as *nonpersons* by persons, thus having a framework appropriate to them” (Cowdin, “The Moral Status of Otherkind in Christian Ethics,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2000] 261–85, at 263).

to let the other make a claim on us when that other is unlike us (i.e., belongs to a different species) is part of what makes us distinctly human. In theological terms, it is part of what constitutes our being created in the image and likeness of God. While, admittedly, much is still left to be done in the more conceptually articulated interpretation of our relationship to other members of the natural world and in adjudicating the complex and often conflicting networks of values and needs that they press on us, this first step is nonetheless a crucial one. This narrative inculcation of the disposition to mourn operates in creative tension with the earlier ironicism in the depiction of the world of mouse, hawk, and skunk, and with the responsibility to conserve wisely in the discussion of the axe and the shovel. Taken together, they provide a more fertile and nuanced starting point than one overarching conceptual scheme or metanarrative. Leopold's classic also shares with the Bible—in a modest way, to be sure—this complex intercalation of different genres and the construction of fine-grained narratives.

Leopold's more humble constellating of small stories, in combination with other genres, maps a more adequate terrain on which to engage the tableau that the sciences are opening up to us. His presentation of the science of ecology has the virtue (in common with Scripture) of narrative intricacy at the fine-grained level of his book's petit narratives, as well as of an intricate bricolage of different genres. Its narrative structure has the potential to open us to the interdependencies that bind us in so many ways into the natural world, as that world is being disclosed to us by modern science. It does so without the dangers attendant on metanarratives like the universe story. It evokes a complex weave of praise and lamentation, wonder and mourning, a sense for the already-present beauty of creation and a feeling for the uncanny and the strange that leaves us in a hopefully tensed expectation of the incalculable advent of the new.

CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that greater attention to the structure and dynamics of narrative is needed in the dialogue between theology and science, particularly the so-called historical sciences (geology, biology, paleontology, etc.). Second, I have argued that serious problems arise when the universe story is "read" at the level of a single metanarrative—"the universe story." These problems surface when one poses the question of suffering, the "cosmodicy question," as I denominated it, to this universe story. In so doing, two significant contrasts with Scripture emerge that further specify these problems in the universe story. First, human identity—in relation to God and humanity's enviroing world—is both secured and problematized in Scripture by a complex interaction of genres, an interaction too often missing from theological readings of the universe story. Second, considering just

the narratives in Scripture, scholars such as Alter and Greenberg remind us that the power of these narratives lies as much in the ways they obscure as disclose, defer meaning as present it; they operate in part by their refusal to fit neatly into one overarching scheme. A studied appreciation of such fine-textured detail is an essential part of a biblical narrative imagination requisite for reading the various histories that science presents to us. Finally, I proposed an alternative paradigm for presenting the results of modern science and reading them with theological intent, one more congruent with biblical narrative imagination: the kind of interweaving of petit narratives in conjunction with other genres found in Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. I conclude with two final observations on reading the book of nature and the book of Scripture in tandem, moving from the first to the second.

Science is conducted and argued in a variety of institutions and social settings, and communicated in different forms, from laboratory report and professional journal, to classroom and textbook, to lecture circuit and popular essay. Theologians have to make careful choices concerning the precise point at which they draw on this complex network. Choosing to do so only, or even principally, at the very largest scale of the universe story, I have argued, goes against the grain of a biblically formed narrative imagination that is informed, provoked, and enriched at pivotal points by the complexity of the little stories, as well as by the nonnarrative genres in Scripture.⁹⁷ I have suggested, as well, that making the universe story the primary interlocutor is not good science. Is it really so easy to contrive a single explanatory mechanism that provides the logic for understanding physical processes in galaxies and stars, biological processes within organisms and ecospheres, and cultural processes in human history? I have suggested that the universe-story authors contrive such a mechanism by borrowing liberally from the tradition of German Idealism and Romanticism, rather than from science per se.⁹⁸ Their choice is not without consequence, and it is certainly not necessitated by the science itself. As a general rule, it seems fair to say that the greater the remove from the localized context of scientific discovery and justification, the greater the care that needs to be taken, and, in particular the greater the need to attend to tensions between science and revelation, not just on the level of the content of what is communicated

⁹⁷ Alex García-Rivera, *St. Martín de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture*, foreword by Virgil Elizondo, introduction by Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), provocatively discusses the power of "little stories."

⁹⁸ A similar objection can be leveled at Dawkins's proposal of his own version of evolution as *the* explanatory paradigm for at least the development of life and human culture, a paradigm that, on his judgment, renders irrational any predication of meaning in this history and, a fortiori of a God behind it. For another critique of this type of generalization of biological evolution (into "evolutionary psychology") see Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution* 61–94.

but also on the level of genre or form, since it is here that tacit assumptions can stow away in the argument and so lead to needless impasses.⁹⁹

One might object that Christian faith and theology are in fact themselves committed to an overarching scheme for history, with landmarks such as creation, incarnation, mission and kingdom of God, cross, resurrection, and second coming. Is the Christian story not a grand narrative that deserves correlation with a story from science that operates on the same scale? Christian faith is, to be sure, committed to the claim that history—human and cosmic—is meaningful, that this meaning is rooted in the faithful love and saving will of God, and that that meaning has, in turn, been revealed in Jesus Christ. Yet, Christian faith is equally committed to the claim that our knowledge, even the knowledge of faith, is incomplete: “We know only in part and prophesy only in part,” Paul insists; “for now we see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor 13:9, 12). The Christian tradition has long insisted that something like a *docta ignorantia*—a learned ignorance—is an integral element to faith’s wisdom. One virtue of Scripture in all its complexity is its ability to convey both confidence in the meaning of the history into which we find ourselves thrown, and a humility that does not cut short the search for knowledge or lead to passive resignation in the face of the challenges we face, but nourishes both exigencies to know and to act more fully and authentically, despite all that we cannot know as long as we see through a mirror dimly. The Christian theological tradition is at its best when it respects and serves as a mystagogy into this *docta ignorantia*. Without denying the legitimacy of a more comprehensive narrative frame, typically gestured at with the term “salvation history,” such a frame cannot operate alone, but only in a dialectical interplay with the mosaic of texts arising out Scripture, a mosaic that has been further elaborated and reconfigured by centuries of theological and spiritual exercises, including those that draw on both contemporary historical critical methods and classical homiletics and meditative practices such as *lectio divina*.

During Christianity’s first centuries, when it had to answer the question of what Athens has to do with Jerusalem, it deployed a full range of such practices, and did so in a way that is instructive for Christian theology today.¹⁰⁰ A sweeping narrative, like that of Augustine’s *City of God*, was

⁹⁹ One such impasse, as I mentioned above, forces on us a choice between, on one extreme, a scientifically warranted presentation of processes in nature in which contingency plays no real role and the purpose of a watchmaker-like designer is clearly apparent, and, on the other extreme, a universe in which real contingency is at play, and, as a consequence, it is irrational to speak of any purpose, divine or otherwise, being worked out at all.

¹⁰⁰ Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2009) retrieves this process precisely with the challenge facing modern environmental theology in view.

not first in this process, but came later, after (and even then, complementary to) the piecewise mining of the “little stories” of Christian Scripture. This kind of theological imagination was crucial for coming to terms with the Hellenistic thought-world; *mutatis mutandis*, it is required for a similar productive reading of the book of nature in light of the histories emerging from modern science.